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The Macedonia Conundrum -- Focal Point of the Balkans

National War College

Geostrategic Context

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20 February 1993

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"The Macedonian Question presents, on the one hand, such a medley of jarring races, longstanding animosities, and ever-recurring atrocities, and, on the other hand, such a jumble of ethnographical uncertainties, unreliable statistics, assertions and counter-assertions flatly contradictory on every point, that one almost despairs of an idea as to how it ought to be settled, or of the hope of ever seeing it settled at all."

C. H. Haskins and R. H. Lord in

Some Problems of the Peace Conference

Lawrence R. Adair

Dr. Watson

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**The Macedonia Conundrum -- Focal Point of the Balkans**

The outbreak of war in the former Yugoslavia has presented the United States with a glaring denunciation of its ineffectual efforts to espouse a comprehensive policy towards this complex region. Foreign policy leaders have been increasingly reactive to shocking developments in the Balkans and seem especially impotent to promote even the most modest calls for stability. Of special significance is the fact that the present crisis does not address the most contentious ethnic region of the Balkans, the amorphous province of Macedonian. The present status of the Balkan crisis mandates the recent United States endorsement of an immediate ceasefire of hostilities coupled with an American sponsored third party negotiation of this conflict. However, these measures are clearly inadequate to the larger ethnic and religious based animosities endemic to the region. What is not clear is how the US should respond to the most compelling and potentially destabilizing problem in the Balkans, the Macedonian

Question. This paper proposes to analyze the Macedonian Question, consider American interests in this conflict, offer a policy recommendation to support these interests and determine the strengths and weaknesses of this policy.

## **BACKGROUND**

Macedonia describes both an ethnically diverse region as well as one of the six republics of the former Yugoslavia. The region has never entailed precise boundaries and covers areas within Greece, Bulgaria, Albania, as well as the former Yugoslavia. Traditionally it has been the site of intense domestic and international conflict predominantly as a result of its geostrategic importance dominating the Vardar and Struma river valleys and its position astride two ancient, competing civilizations. Exacerbating the problem of its identity, Macedonia recognizes nine major peoples within its population who generally consider themselves affiliated with a "greater" Macedonia. Serbia, Greece and Bulgaria have historical and political claims to the region which had been largely contained by Josip Broz Tito's incorporation of Macedonia into Yugoslavia.

## **HISTORICAL BASIS**

The longstanding potential for conflagration has earned

Macedonia the moniker as the "powder keg of Europe".<sup>1</sup> The bi-polar balance manifested during the Cold War was successful in disguising, if not completely suppressing, the severe tensions in the peninsula. Problems were formalized with the creation of a Macedonian state carved out of the Ottoman and Austria/Hungarian empires at the close of World War II. However, the region has a tradition of bitter ethnic wars, especially in the modern era. The Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878 was fought to determine religious jurisdiction throughout the Balkans. At the end of the war, the Treaty of San Stefano ceded most of Macedonia to the newly created state of Bulgaria. Acquisition of this area had been a key domestic and political objective as the possessor would become the dominant Balkan national power. It remains the basis for Bulgaria's claim to Macedonia, even today. The results of this treaty were overturned barely four months later in a settlement by the Great Powers at the Congress of Berlin in 1878. Largely as a result of efforts by England, which feared that Bulgaria would subordinate itself to Russian dictates, the Congress returned Macedonia to Turkish rule.<sup>2</sup> As a result, an active revolutionary movement emerged in 1893 with the founding of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO). This organization sought emancipation from what it considered to

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<sup>1</sup>F. Stephen Larrabee, "Long Memories and Short Fuzes" International Security (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, Winter 1990/1991) 58.

<sup>2</sup>Will S. Monroe, Bulgaria and Her People (Boston, Massachusetts: The Page Company, 1914) 359.

be the oppressive rule of the Turks and had equal advocates for either a return to Bulgarian rule or the establishment of a separate Macedonian state. To remain effective, IMRO required outside assistance which Bulgaria was eager to supply in order to legitimize its future territorial claims.<sup>3</sup>

The Balkan countries' fear of Turkish hegemony fostered an unusual alliance among Greece, Bulgaria, Montenegro and Serbia, at a time when Turkey was recovering from the domestic strife associated with the end of the Italo-Turkish War of 1911. Their collective goal was not only to suppress Turkey's voracious appetite but to gain control of the key land mass of the Balkans, Macedonia. The First Balkan War of 1912-1913 resulted in the liberation of Macedonia as well as the annexation of other Turkish controlled territories throughout Europe. However, failure to determine an equitable plan for the distribution of the new territories resulted in the Second Balkan War fought during the summer of 1913. The Treaty of Bucharest ended the fighting but created the formulation for the modern Macedonian Question by establishing the boundaries of the present day region. Greece received about half of Macedonia, Bulgaria a small section and Serbia the remainder.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Stephen E. Palmer, Jr. and Robert R. King, Yugoslav Communism and the Macedonian Question (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1971) 7.

<sup>4</sup>Palmer and King, 8.

World War I provided the impetus for Bulgaria to reclaim the San Stefano territories by allying herself with the Central Powers. During the war, Bulgaria occupied much of this region only to have the Treaty of Versailles return Macedonia to pre-war boundaries, less Bulgarian access to the Aegean as a penalty for her aggression. Additionally, Macedonia was ceded to the loosely confederated states of the newly formed Yugoslavia, as a part of southern Serbia. By losing, Bulgaria now controlled only Pirin Macedonia in her interior. The Bulgarian occupation during World War I had been welcomed by the populace with IMRO leaders assuming positions of responsibility in the fledgling government. Serbia returned to this area after the war with a vengeance that bears stark parallels to the "ethnic cleansing" programs within Bosnia-Herzegovina today. IMRO moved its headquarters to Bulgaria and mounted guerrilla operations against Serbian leaders. By treating Macedonia as part of Serbia, the new government in Belgrade poisoned future Yugoslav-Bulgarian relations.

The inter-war period saw the process of "Serbization" carried forward to the extreme. The national language was restricted to the Serbian dialect, Serbian colonizers swept in and the newly appointed leaders promoted abject Serbian nationalism. This period was marked by four significant forces attempting to influence the region:

"First, Serb-dominated Yugoslavia, holding that portion of Macedonia in which most Macedonian Slavs lived, attempted to



bring about the integration of the Macedonians with the Serb national group. Second, Bulgaria laid claim to Yugoslav Macedonia. Third, there was the influence of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization concentrated in and led from Bulgaria. Fourth, there were numerous Communist initiatives vis-a-vis the Macedonian problem."<sup>5</sup>

In the late 1930s, Bulgaria again saw the coming global war as an opportunity to resolve the Macedonian problem by siding with Berlin. Once again, Macedonia was occupied by Bulgaria only to be lost by treaty at the end of the war. "During World War II, Croat-Serb animosity exploded into some of the most vicious violence the Balkan peninsula has known, leaving a strong residue of hostility and distrust..."<sup>6</sup> The inhabitants had become progressively disillusioned with the central authority and pervasiveness of outside rule and became enthused by the autonomy offered by Tito's view of a federated Yugoslavia. Additionally, Tito's relative independence from the Soviet Communist regime, coupled with the concern that Sofia was a mere stooge of Moscow, heightened expectations. At the extreme, "this may have been seen as a first step in a Socialist Balkan Federation -- a dream of various left-wing politicians in the turbulent period between the wars."<sup>7</sup> Throughout its modern evolution, Macedonia has sought to emphasize its distinct language and culture in order ultimately to establish a separate Macedonia free from Serbian or

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<sup>5</sup>Palmer and King, 12-13.

<sup>6</sup>Larrabee, 66.

<sup>7</sup>Frederick B. Chary, "Bulgaria's Role in East Europe" Current History (Philadelphia: Current History, Inc., December, 1985) 382.

Bulgarian influence.

#### UNITED STATES' INTERESTS

The seeds of the present day problems of Macedonia are sown throughout its modern history outlined above. The legitimate concern is that old nationalistic scores will be settled now that the restraining influence of the superpowers has abated. The crux of the issue centers around the ethnic identity of the Slavic majority in Macedonia; especially between Macedonia and Bulgaria. From the Macedonian perspective, this majority defines a nation and Bulgaria must therefore guarantee minority rights to the Macedonians residing in Pirin Macedonia. From the Bulgarian view, the Slavic population in Macedonia is both ethnically and historically Bulgarian, although they deny territorial aspirations. Both the Macedonians and the Greeks see this position as particularly threatening.<sup>8</sup> Greece has even refused to recognize the term "Macedonia" for fear of provoking a call for a united "greater" Macedonian state which would necessarily include a large portion of northern Greece. Increasing tension between these states has resulted in numerous border "incidents" of late. "In May 1990, for instance, more than 50,000 Macedonians blocked several border crossings between Yugoslavia and Greece to demand that the Greek government recognize the

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<sup>8</sup>Larrabee, 74-75.

Macedonian minority in Greece..."<sup>9</sup>

The problems of Macedonia are complicated by both "nationalistic" agendas of the increasingly independent former republics and by the ethnic and religious pedigree of the region. Some would argue that the problem is insolvable due to the hybrid mix of peoples and, therefore, "the creation of a state or an autonomous region on national lines is impossible."<sup>10</sup> The receding central power of Belgrade has allowed the republics to pursue "national" issues. Beyond the Macedonian issue, the region is embroiled in a host of comparatively lesser ethnic problems to include, Albanian rights in Kosovo, the Turkish minority in Bulgaria, the Hungarian minority in Romania and the Bessarabia issue; not counting the present armed conflict centered on Bosnia-Herzegovina. However, the Macedonian Question, as has been established, provides the tinder for the powder keg; a particularly disheartening analogy given the sparks flying among Serbs, Croats and Muslims to the north.

United States interests in the region are both significant and real. Beyond a humanitarian concern for peace, the eradication of the abhorrent policy of "ethnic cleansing" and support for suffering non-combatants, the prospects for a viable trading partner within a stable and secure Europe is undermined

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<sup>9</sup>Larrabee, 76.

<sup>10</sup>Chary, 382.

by constant fighting in the Balkans. Failure to address these problems now will debilitate important foreign policy objectives to promote the democratic process in the former Soviet Union, the reunification of Germany and the incorporation of Eastern Europe into the political and economic system of the West. Indeed, "the real threat to European security is likely to come not from the military confrontation in Central Europe -- as in the past -- but from the political instability in Southeastern Europe."<sup>11</sup> The same dedication, resolve and determination that marked US leadership and success in NATO should now be oriented on the newly unleashed forces at work in the Balkans. Surely a region and threat worthy of the "vital interest" label.

#### UNITED STATES POLICY

Given the assurance of peace and stability of the Balkan peninsula as a vital US interest, a comprehensive, yet admittedly provocative, policy should be pursued. For the short term, the immediate execution of a ceasefire in Bosnia-Herzegovina is essential. Furthermore, a mutually acceptable set of boundaries must be enforced to contain breaches of the ceasefire. Clearly the European community has a singular interest in the stability of the area and must assume the dominant role in the enforcement of the arbitrated peace. This division of labor will allow the United States to address the more fractious ethnic issues, most

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<sup>11</sup>Larrabee, 87.

especially the Macedonian Question.

With regard to Macedonia, the United States should pursue the following actions which collectively will provide a comprehensive policy for this area:

First, immediately recognize Macedonia as a sovereign and independent state and initiate consultations to establish full diplomatic relations. Only the clout of American recognition can provide international legitimacy to the Macedonian claim for independence. In this regard, the Israeli corollary is instructive. Such a United States pronouncement stakes out the boundaries of US vital interests in the region and provides a policy consistent with similar support for Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, and Slovenia announced on 7 April 1992.<sup>12</sup> To the extent that warring factions will be dissuaded from exporting violence into Macedonia as a result of American recognition, so much the better.

Second, coerce or coopt Greece to refute its prohibitions regarding the international recognition of the term "Macedonia" to describe the former Yugoslav republic and pressure Greece into an acceptable form of recognition of Macedonian independence. This will provide for the immediate entry of Macedonia into

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<sup>12</sup>President George Bush, "Press Statement of 7 April 1992", Review of International Affairs (Belgrade, Yugoslavia: Assembly of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, 1 May 1992) 26.

international councils such as the United Nations and the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), further enhancing its legitimacy. The participation of Greece in the resolution of this question will be mandatory given her ancient association with Macedonia and the geostrategic importance of "Greek Macedonia" today. The establishment of two distinct Macedonian areas, one independent, the other an integral part of Greece, will be a central component of the answer. Early recognition by Greece, or at least acquiescence, will assist the process.

Third, enter into a formal military agreement with Greece and Turkey to guarantee the sovereignty of Macedonia. As the peace plan to resolve the Yugoslavian disintegration unfolds, it will become apparent that the introduction into Macedonia of ground combat "peacekeepers" will be necessary, beyond the small number of UN observers presently posted to this region. It is essential that the present hostilities not migrate south, endangering not only Greece and Turkey, but perhaps inviting the threat of Islamic extremists of the Middle East as well. The United States will invest its military and political capital to ensure the security of Macedonia. If the situation must include the introduction of American ground combat forces, it will be prudent to inject this force into a region not yet in open conflict to take advantage of the eminently defensible terrain to preclude fighting from igniting Macedonia. The inclusion of

Greek and Turkish forces, under American military leadership, will allow these two traditional antagonists to be satisfied that neither will obtain undue influence in the region. Additionally, each will represent their dominant Christian and Islamic communities to further restrain outside influences.

Finally, promote the democratization of the region by leveraging critical economic assistance. This is especially relevant given the dire conditions of the Macedonian economy, the most impoverished of all the former republics and now feeling the effects of the United Nations economic embargo of its contiguous trading partners. By demanding political and economic reforms as a pre-condition for Western aid, the United States builds a basis for incorporation of Macedonia into a global market economy. As one expert noted, "this gives the West some influence over the process of democratization."<sup>13</sup> As always, the most important export the United States has to offer is the ideals which have allowed the American value system to prosper. The proselytizing of these values should be a central theme of our policy towards Macedonia.

#### **ANALYSIS OF RECOMMENDATION**

This proposed Macedonian policy of the United States provides a comprehensive approach to answering the Macedonian

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<sup>13</sup>Larrabee, 88.

Question. It achieves this goal in a reasonable, rational manner. The chief advantages of this approach are as follows:

- o provides US leadership to a vexing regional issue before it degenerates into violence.
- o outlines a proactive, comprehensive policy which overcomes the old, reactive methodology formerly employed in this area.
- o invests US strengths, military, political, economic, to maximum effect; simultaneously reduces the risks to US interests.
- o incorporates longstanding antagonists in a mutual effort to resolve potential conflict in the region.

As noted earlier, this plan is not without some risks. The primary weaknesses of this plan are as follows:

- o it is provocative; requires US dedicated leadership and engagement.
- o exposes American troops to the potential for combat in an extremely dangerous geographical environment.
- o causes the US to invest its credibility in an issue some experts view as unsolvable.

The recommended United States policy toward Macedonia breaks from the recent spectrum of traditional alternatives ranging from



benign neglect to reactive engagement. As such, it carries with it prudent risks inherent in all endeavors requiring innovative thinking, unwavering statements of principle and bold leadership. The recent history of this region mandates such an ambitious policy as opposed to the diluted pronouncements of the past. New solutions require new thinking, let's start with Macedonia.

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